



Barbara Wilson

Good Girl

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Some horror movies of the Fabulous Fifties have achieved cult status. One of Hollywood's busy actresses in that genre has often been overlooked: Going by the inconspicuous name of Barbara Wilson, she was an attractive, dark-haired starlet who usually portrayed the level-headed "good girl" in movies like *Blood of Dracula* (1957) and *Terror in the Midnight Sun* (1959). It was an honor to interview her, as I consider her to be underrated. She was a rare actress from Hollywood who didn't rely on publicity and dating to further her career. She loved acting, and that was her focus.

Barbara Anne Wilson was born on October 24, 1936, in Pasadena, California. Her father Kenneth was a manager at Bank of America and her mother Mary a homemaker. Barbara was raised in a well-educated household with her two siblings, Suzanne and Steven. As a teenager, she was approached by a representative of the Adrian Teen Modeling Agency and began posing for magazines, advertisements and pageants with the latter keeping her busy. Within a year, she was crowned Miss Alhambra, Queen of the Child Welfare Dance, Wisteria Queen, Miss Hi Neighbor, Miss Pennant Girl, and Miss Junior Rose Bowl. Barbara remembered that the experience felt like walking into a dream:

"I was raised in a household that was quite conservative. My parents didn't like the idea of modeling. They'd heard the rumors of Hollywood's casting couch, and they didn't want me

to fall into that. We compromised so that as long as I didn't fall behind on my coursework and got my diploma, I could do it. I was fortunate to get Adrian as my agency. They were really good and I got a lot of good exposure. They respected my parents' wishes too, so everything I did was tasteful and appropriate."

Although she was Hollywood's most in-demand model, that didn't prevent her from the occasional acting gig while earning her diploma:

"I suppose *The Big Payoff* was my first acting job. It was a game show. I appeared in various advertisements between tapings. I was one of several girls chosen. We did it during spring break, so I didn't miss classes. My academics were a priority. After I graduated [in June 1954], I was able to do more. I did other commercials, but nothing memorable."

Barbara competed for the title of Miss Rheingold, a pageant sponsored by Rheingold Brewery. After the months-long competition, six finalists were selected to tour the United States, and the eventual winner would model for the brand the following year. Barbara was among the finalists, which also included Suzanne Alexander, Grace Brown, Stephanie Griffin, Jean Moorhead and Nancy Woodruff in the competition that she attributes to launching her career:

"Miss Rheingold is what started my career as an actress. The other finalists and I were in New York doing a publicity tour with Willie Mays, and an agent approached me. He signed me days later. It felt like a dream come true. The pageant was so much fun that it didn't feel like work. Our boarding and airfare were paid for by the company. I did fall behind on my coursework



Barbara Wilson, Jean Willes and Tina Carver cowering before unseen horrors in *The Man Who Turned to Stone* (1957).



A publicity photo of Barbara watering plants.



Barbara on the cover of an Italian periodical, *Tempo*, in 1955.

a bit, so I had a busy summer earning those credits back. "[Willie] was a kind man and so humble. We gave him a luggage set courtesy of Rheingold and shook his hand onstage at the Polo Grounds. I'm telling you that it

was courtesy of Rheingold because they paid for the luggage." She returned to Pasadena and enrolled at Santa Monica College before studying acting at the renowned Pasadena Playhouse alongside other students, including Gene Hackman. She also studied dance with Eddy Gaye. During her studies, she stayed at the Hollywood Studio Club with roommates (and future stars) Dyan Cannon, June Blair and Barbara Eden. Her yearning for acting prompted her to leave the school:

"I learned a lot at the Pasadena Playhouse. I wish I could have studied there longer, but they don't allow you to study and do movies simultaneously. I was getting so many offers and I wanted to get out and work. I'm still good friends with Barbara [Eden]. I last spoke with her six months ago." She was cast in *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (1955), where she stood alongside Ruta Lee in a forgettable walk-on role. Barbara was then given leading lady roles in two unsold television pilots. *Captain Fathom* with Don Megowan was an action-adventure about a submarine crew traveling in enemy waters to deactivate a nuclear weapon. It wasn't purchased by the networks because they felt production costs would be too high, and there were concerns about the potential longevity of the series. It was a great experience for the budding actress: "I felt miscast, but I had so much fun. It was a unique script. The premise was unlike anything on television at the time. A lot of the filming was done underwater, so I had a double who did the stunts. I felt special because stunt doubles were rarely used on television.

Budgets were so low since TV was a newer medium." The other pilot, *Fremont: The Trailblazer*, was a western-themed drama produced by CBS, starring Steve Cochran and James Gavin. Barbara was chosen among 37 women who auditioned for the role of Jessie Benton. The plot involved a group who encounter obstacles while on a mapping expedition of the Oregon territory. This did not sell because producers felt there were a lot of westerns airing and as a result, it wouldn't find a loyal audience. Of the two television series, Barbara preferred *Fremont: The Trailblazer*: "It was a better fit for me [than *Captain Fathom*]. I got to do more acting. The script was much better, too, and it was serious. Westerns were really popular that decade. I was a bit concerned because Steve Cochran was rumored to be a notorious womanizer, but I can honestly say that he never made a pass at me, even during an intimate dinner that we had together." *Blood of Dracula* (1957), *The Man Who Turned to Stone* (1957) and *Lost, Lonely, and Vicious* (1958) followed. *Teenage Doll* (1957), starring



Up to no good: Barbara reaches for a gun in Roger Corman's *Teenage Doll* (1957). The role of bad girl Betty Herne was one of her favorites.



Lost, Lonely and Vicious (1958)

June Kenney, is considered one of Roger Corman's better early movies, and the role of Betty Herne was one of Barbara's favorite parts:

"It was the only role in my career where I got to play a mean girl. It really gave me a chance to broaden my range as an actress. I get more fan mail from that movie than for anything else I've done. Roger Corman was a kind man. He was one of the rare producers in Hollywood who was a total professional despite his movies being shoestring or low-budget. He made sure that everyone on the set had a good work ethic. He didn't tolerate anyone's ego."

Barbara began auditioning for various television series and got a

recurring role on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* as Alice, Ricky's occasional girlfriend. *Terror in the Midnight Sun* (1959) was one of Barbara's last feature films:

"I spent a month in Sweden during the filming. I was paid \$500 a week for that, which wasn't bad for a low-budget flick. I laughed when you told me that it was a cult classic. It had a \$40,000 budget and it wasn't a big success. It did well in the UK, though. I'm glad that fans still get a kick out of it."

It wasn't without controversy, though: After filming concluded, the director asked Barbara's stand-in to do a nude shower scene that would later be inserted into the movie in such a way as to make



A ghastly-looking Friedrich von Ledebur with Barbara Wilson in a publicity shot for *The Man Who Turned to Stone* (1957).



Barbara Wilson in *Terror in the Midnight Sun* (1959), which was later reworked and retitled the more exploitive *Invasion of the Animal People*.

viewers think it was Barbara who was showering. This wasn't in the script, nor was Barbara notified about it:

"I found out about the scene when a friend of mine showed me a few reels of the picture. I was absolutely shocked when I saw the girl in the nude. She looked very much like me and our figures were similar.

The scene lasted for a full minute. You can imagine how I felt watching a girl who is supposed to be me standing there without a single stitch of clothes on. Somebody suggested that I sue so they'd remove the scene. [Wilson sued a company called Herts-Lion for \$150,000 which in 1960 unsuccessfully tried to get the U.S. distribution rights.]

I didn't expect to get anything in that lawsuit. They didn't remove the scene, and I just let the whole thing go!"

Terror in the Midnight Sun was unseen in the U.S. until 1962, when zero-budget producer-director Jerry Warren acquired it, cut it down to about 50 minutes and then shot new scenes to bring the running time back UP again(!). Wilson, John Carradine and Katherine Victor are among the actors in Warren's new version, which was retitled *Invasion of the Animal People*.

In 1961, it was reported in the Hollywood Citizen News that Barbara was supposed to star in a feature called *The Black Pirate* in Rome. It was never produced, but Barbara had a lot of opportunities in Italy that she remembers vividly:

"There were a lot of promises that were made when I vacationed there. Dyan [Cannon] introduced me to some producers who informally offered roles. Most of them either didn't come to fruition or I rejected them for one reason or another. I didn't want to be stuck in Europe for months without getting an offer in writing... There was a role I was offered, though. It was a feature about the character Spartacus. It would've been ten days in Sicily, and I'd be acting two of those days. I think I turned it down because I didn't wanna take a lengthy trip for two days of work. I wish I had taken the offer. It would've been nice to visit Sicily."

When asked why she retired from acting, Barbara responded:

"I made the mistake of switching agents in the hopes of getting cast in wide-release movies. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. He turned out not to be so good. I also got married and had a family, so I focused on that... I see flyers for casting calls in various theaters. There's no doubt in my mind I could perform again. It would be quite a step down, though. I don't know if I'd feel good doing amateur theater after all of the professional work I've done."

Barbara today lives in Seal Beach, California, near her daughters. She is an avid reader, visits her grandchildren frequently and travels across the country with her boyfriend. She still gets a lot of mail from fans.